

GAMES

FAQ

Q What is Microsoft's Live service and do I need it to play games on Windows Vista?

A Live is the online gaming service for Xbox, which Microsoft has now expanded on to Windows Vista. You'll need a Live account to play many new releases online, such as Shadowrun, for example, which is reviewed opposite.

The Live account gives you a Gamertag unique identity. Using it allows you to see which of your Live friends are playing what games. Your Gamertag also tracks your gaming achievements, which you can compare against those of your friends.

Live accounts are divided into silver and gold memberships. Silver membership is free, and lets you see what your friends are up to online and join a limited set of online games. Gold membership is required to set up multiplayer games with friends, use the TrueSkill matchmaking service and play cross-platform games against Xbox 360 owners. Gold costs £40 a year and covers PC and Xbox 360 use. Currently, there aren't enough games to justify the outlay for PC alone.

Seth Barton

Notebooks, video and games expert

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CODEMASTERS

Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar

★★★★★

£27 + £9 a month inc VAT



World of Warcraft has been hugely successful, both critically and financially, but its fantasy realm is based upon little more than a few real-time strategy games. So Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar looks to have a significant advantage, with the expansive works of JRR Tolkien to call on for inspiration.

You select a character from familiar races such as humans, elves, dwarves and hobbits. There's a range of seven-character classes, including minstrel and burglar. You then venture out into the world to help the weak, fight monsters and villains, and roughly follow in the footsteps of the books' heroes.

The developer has used the same quest-based gameplay as in World of Warcraft, but shoe-horned in all the events and geography of Middle-Earth, which is rather like squeezing a fat hobbit into a tight jerkin. It's not long before you realise what a truly astounding feat has been achieved. They've re-created the whole of Middle-Earth, from Ted Sandyman's mill up to the Eye of Sauron.

The depth of detail is absolutely charming. Wandering The Shire is a delight, as you see locations and characters familiar from the films and books at every turn. The quests there are as laid-back as the place, involving delivering pies or keeping pests down. Later areas are darker and less friendly, giving the world an expansive feel.

The game is also tightly plotted. As you move up the levels, it lures you out of your safe area with a set of quests that run parallel to the stories from the books, but make you feel

SUMMARY

- ✓ Awesome re-creation of Middle-Earth
- ✓ Well-thought-through combat
- ✗ Too similar to World of Warcraft

ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 1.8GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, 12GB disk space
PART CODE B000FNA2D2
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.lotro.com



▲ Even powerful wizards are bedazzled by the real-time reflection effects in Lord of the Rings Online

important to the larger picture. So when you arrive in the town of Bree, Frodo and friends have just left it; and you've got to deal with the problems the Nazgul have created, plus sort out the human brigands that have been assisting them. Like in the books, the quest plots aren't simplistic: the heroes don't always win and the villains rarely get their come-uppance immediately.

There's a devilishly pleasing reward when your character reaches level 10. At this point, you gain a monster character, such as a giant spider or orc-reaver. You can use this to battle higher-level human characters. The combat works well, in monster mode or otherwise, and is very similar to that of World of Warcraft but with less emphasis on magical abilities. The team-play is well thought through, too.

If you don't know Tolkien's creation, you're not going to be as excited walking around it as a fan would be. However, given the coherent world, excellent combat, friendly atmosphere and the fact that it's almost completely bug-free at launch, we can wholeheartedly recommend this as the best of the current online role-playing games.

Evan Knowles

Top 5 games

1. Supreme Commander

£15 inc VAT ★★★★★



This RTS has the biggest battles ever seen on a PC. There's a vast range of units to command and the graphics are slick, but you'll need a powerful PC to run it smoothly.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.supremecommander.com FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



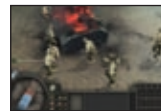
2. Company of Heroes

£14 inc VAT ★★★★★



This game looks fantastic, from the historically accurate units to the bombed-out French towns. But it's the innovative gameplay that makes it the best RTS around.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.thq.com FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



3. FIFA 2007

£13 inc VAT ★★★★★



The fully licensed teams and slick presentation have always been welcome, but FIFA 2007 is easier to play than its predecessor. Arguably, the best football game around.

SUPPLIER www.gameplay.com DETAILS http://fifa07.ea.com FULL REVIEW Jan 2007



4. FlatOut 2

£12 inc VAT ★★★★★



FlatOut 2 includes outrageous crashes that let you send your driver through the windscreen and into the road. It's also a brilliant racing game.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.flatoutgame.com FULL REVIEW Oct 2006



5. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

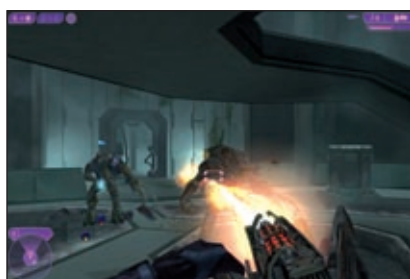
£15 inc VAT ★★★★★



The most stunning role-playing game we've ever played. It looks amazing, and there's so much to it you could play it for a month and still have loads left to do.

SUPPLIER www.gameplay.com DETAILS www.elderscrolls.com FULL REVIEW Jul 2006





▲ Everything from Halo 1 is revisited here in the sequel, including annoying space zombies

MICROSOFT Halo 2

★★★★

£30 inc VAT

An unusual choice to spearhead gaming on Windows Vista, this three-year-old Xbox game is a first-person shooter that hasn't aged well. Much of this is because it was always a rushed and unsatisfying sequel to the groundbreaking Halo. With no significant changes, bar some graphical spit'n'polish and an option to use mouse and keyboard controls instead of a gamepad, Halo 2's faults are even more obvious now than ever.

While there's certainly entertainment in shooting aliens with a variety of fun weapons, it's a textbook implementation of the chokingly linear corridors and respawning enemies that haunt this kind of game. The vehicle sections – be they in 4x4 buggies, huge tanks or light aircraft – are especially dreadful. All they amount to is going slightly faster in something that can't aim quite as well as when you're on foot.

The only real highlight of the game is the unexpected flipping of perspective from Halo's main man, the Master Chief, to one of the aliens he usually fights. The Arbiter, as he's called, may play almost identically to the Chief, but gaining an insight into a formerly faceless foe makes for some interesting storytelling. Unfortunately, apart from this the plot is overly complex sequel fodder. Even Halo 2's developers have admitted that the cutscenes weren't what they should have been.

Halo 2 rarely descends into actual awfulness. It's just so crushingly average, even in its oft-lauded multiplayer mode, when compared to the best shooters on the PC. Granted, most of them are a few years old, too, but Halo 2 doesn't even have better graphics, in case that was tempting you to pick it over a £5 Far Cry or £10 Half-Life 2. The higher resolutions available on the PC don't mask the crude character models from the Xbox engine, and it looks blocky and dingy. If you must buy it, bear in mind that it's inexplicably Vista only.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy and accessible
- ✗ Ugly graphics
- ✗ Linear and dull gameplay

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows Vista, 2GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 128MB 3D card, 7GB disk space
PART CODE B000F6W8AE
SUPPLIER www.play.com
DETAILS www.microsoft.com/games/halo2



▲ The graphics in DiRT are amazing, from the mud on your car to the shattering glass

CODEMASTERS Colin McRae: DiRT

★★★★★

£18 inc VAT

It's been a quiet old time for rally games. The last significant one was Richard Burns Rally, which is a couple of years old now and so brutally tough that it was too much like hard work for a lot of people. Though the latest McRae mercifully sticks to its more accessible guns, it too has upped the authenticity.

It's rather smart in how it does it, though. Rather than making its cars uncontrollable bucking broncos, it's the roads that have been rethought in Colin McRae: DiRT. You are presented with a double-whammy of remarkable graphics and intense physics, which makes the gravel, tarmac or dirt tracks look and feel like the uneven, shifting and treacherous surfaces they're supposed to be. The effects are great, and the game forces you to control your computer car in a far more realistic way.

While in most cases this means a harder race, it is a much more satisfying one, and it is a huge leap on for rally gaming. Rallying is supposed to be you versus the road, and now it really is. Still, DiRT marks a move away from McRae's traditional lone rallying into being a much broader driving game. It offers a wide selection of head-to-head race modes, and it has enough polish to pull it off. There's also an attempt to make DiRT more appealing to the rally layman by throwing in gimmick races such as dune buggies and big rigs. These are loads of fun, but don't feel anywhere near as well realised as the more serious stuff.

Unfortunately, there's pretty much no multiplayer mode to speak of. You can race other players online, but all you will see of them is a name on a scoreboard. It's a sad omission for what is otherwise rally gaming's finest hour. This is not a game that any driving fan should miss out on. It's an amazing leap forward, well and truly leaving behind all those other racers that think a road need only be a flat strip of static pixels.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Looks absolutely incredible
- ✓ Roads that feel like roads
- ✗ Poor multiplayer mode

DRIVING GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 3GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 128MB 3D card, 12GB disk space
PART CODE B000NG37AG
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.codemasters.com/dirt



▲ Big guns always made Tom feel secure in those dark alleyways

MICROSOFT Shadowrun

★★★★

£25 inc VAT

Shadowrun is an online team-based shooter based upon a popular pen-and-paper role-playing game. In the near future, magic has returned to the world after an absence of thousands of years. This means that trolls, elves and dwarves walk the Earth and that magical spells are once again possible.

Players wield a mixture of conventional firearms, high-tech gadgets and magical powers. At the start of each match, you must first choose a race, each with its own unique skill. Then, before each individual round, you buy equipment and magical powers using money earned from kills. This means that you can create a unique mix of skills and equipment to match your playing style, or to counter that of your opponent. We played as both a mini-gun-toting troll with enhanced vision and targeting, and a swift elf with a katana, the ability to teleport through walls and a mini-glider on his back.

Shadowrun runs only on Windows Vista, as it requires you to have a Microsoft Live account (see FAQ, left). This means it can be played against Xbox 360 owners with the same game, an interesting idea that may appeal to those with console-owning friends.

The graphics look good, with plenty of nice magical effects, and the character animation is the smoothest we've seen in an online shooter. Sadly, there are only nine levels to play on. They're all well designed to take advantage of the powers and gadgets available, but we expected more at this price.

The gameplay is more tactical than most shooters, with team coordination often winning out over headshot skills. Battles become increasingly complex and hectic as players buy more powerful abilities and weapons. Shadowrun is a decent game, but the limited number of levels along with the requirement for both Vista and Live, result in an average rating.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Intriguing mix of guns and magic
- ✗ Windows Vista only
- ✗ Limited servers without a Gold Live account

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows Vista, dual-core processor, 2GB RAM, 256MB RAM 3D card, 4.5GB disk space PART CODE B000P63V5K
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.shadowrun.com